

GSA Assistive Technologies Library Accessibility Survey

October 2024

Project Background and Overview

The Graduate Students Association (GSA) is the largest dedicated postgraduate association in Australia, representing over 40,000 graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne.

This survey and report was developed with support from Ashley Anderson (she/her), Senior Learning Designer – Accessibility at the University of Melbourne, and Rashika Bahl (she/her), a PhD Candidate in the School of Computing and Information Systems. Rashika raised issues surrounding the accessibility of library resources, especially for research students who use assistive technologies.

This survey aims to highlight the nature of these accessibility issues to ensure appropriate changes can be made by the University of Melbourne and publishers of academic materials.

Respondents consented to their information provided to be used for advocacy work. Some quotes have been edited for clarity, and sections have been highlighted in bold font to express importance. Not every respondent answered each question.

For any further details, please contact Lily Day (she/her), GSA's Co-Manager Policy and Advocacy at lily.day@gsa.unimelb.edu.au or GSA's Policy and Advocacy team at policy_advocacy@gsa.unimelb.edu.au



Background - Assistive technologies at the University of Melbourne

Students and graduate researchers who rely on the use of assistive technologies such as screen readers or alternative input devices struggle to access library resources in an efficient and timely manner. This is largely due to the inaccessibility of websites and resources provided by publishers.

While the SEDS review will support the team in enhancing their offerings, having students rely solely on formatting services in the long run is not sustainable. Even when a document is accessible, the publisher's website may itself be inaccessible or prohibitively difficult to navigate using assistive technology. This means that a document which would otherwise take a few minutes to find might take hours to access for someone who uses assistive tech.

This difference in time needed to access materials can have major impacts for student in aspects of life including accessing other work and work/life/study balance. It may also result in perceived performance or time management issues which can impact future opportunities and career.

The University of Melbourne's Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2023-2026 includes the need to "Develop an approach to support researchers (graduate researchers and staff) with disability to engage in research on an equitable basis with their peers." (p. 12).

Survey summary

The GSA Assistive Technologies Library Accessibility Survey was open throughout September and October of 2024.

The survey received **7 responses** from current or recent graduate students at the University of Melbourne who use assistive technologies. The results of this survey are not representative but highlight the nature of the accessibility issues faced by graduate students using assistive technologies.

Key ideas from survey results included:

- All respondents used Mac Operating System (OS), indicating it is a key OS for new accessibility measures to be catered to.
- Respondents had a range of reasons why they need to use assistive technologies. Following the SEDS review, updating key systems and interfaces to ensure they are compatible with assistive technologies will be crucial.
- 67% of respondents reported facing issues or delays when using assistive technology to access library systems or resources. These impact on a student's ability to do their work in set time frames.
- Systems and interfaces are inconsistent both within the University and externally from publishers in terms of their ability to meet access needs. Accessibility must be a core part of setting standards and upgrading systems.

Survey respondents

5

5 respondents are currently enrolled as a PhD student

1

1 respondent is doing a different graduate degree

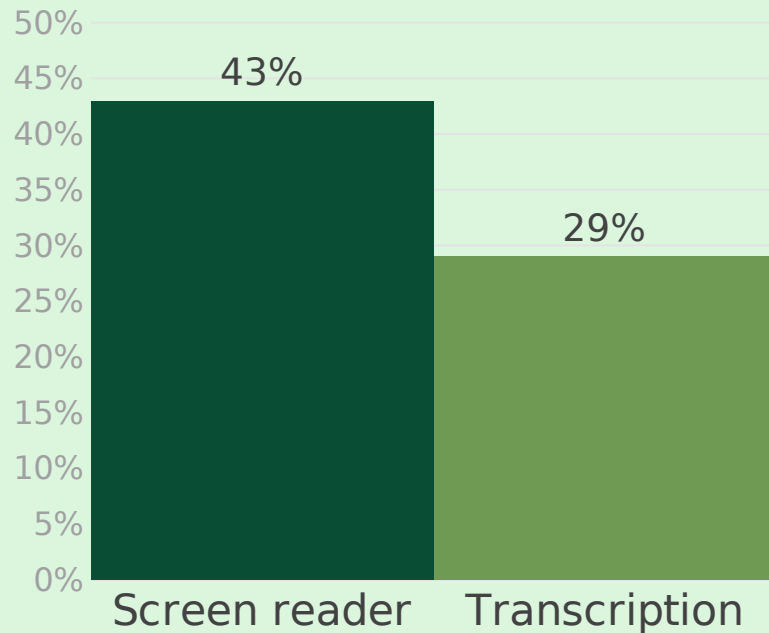
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1 respondent graduated from their graduate degree in 2021

All 7 respondents use assistive technologies for university work or research.

Types of assistive technology used

Most common assistive technology



Five out of the seven respondents reported using more than one type of assistive technology. One respondent did not answer.

Other assistive technologies reported:

- Screen magnifier (MacOS, iPadOS, iOS Zoom)
- Voice-to-text
- Text-to-speech (Word and Apple)
- Hearing aid
- Bone conduction headphones
- Note taking software
- Zoom
- iPad

Specific technologies mentioned:

Transcription

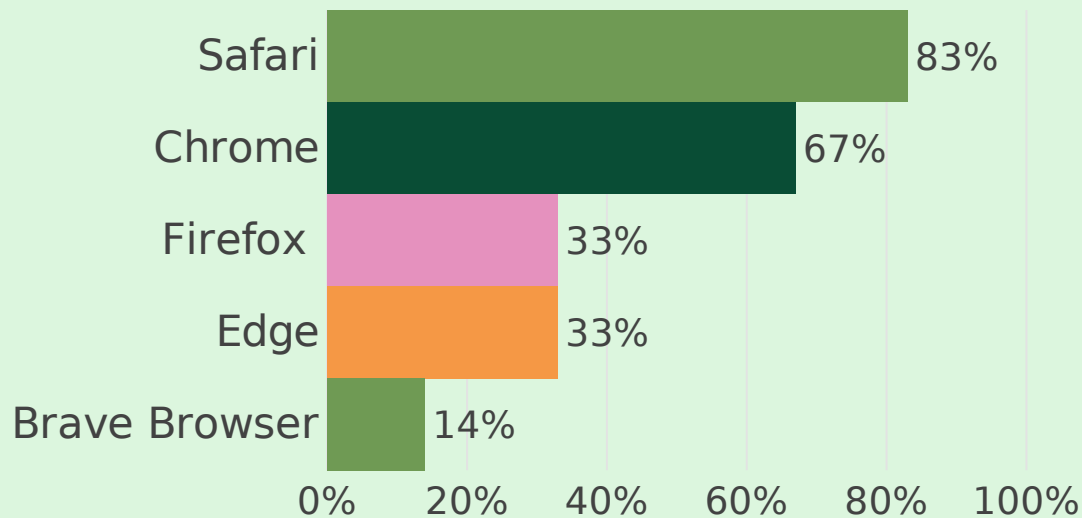
- Otter.ai

Screen reader

- VoiceOver

Operating system and browsers

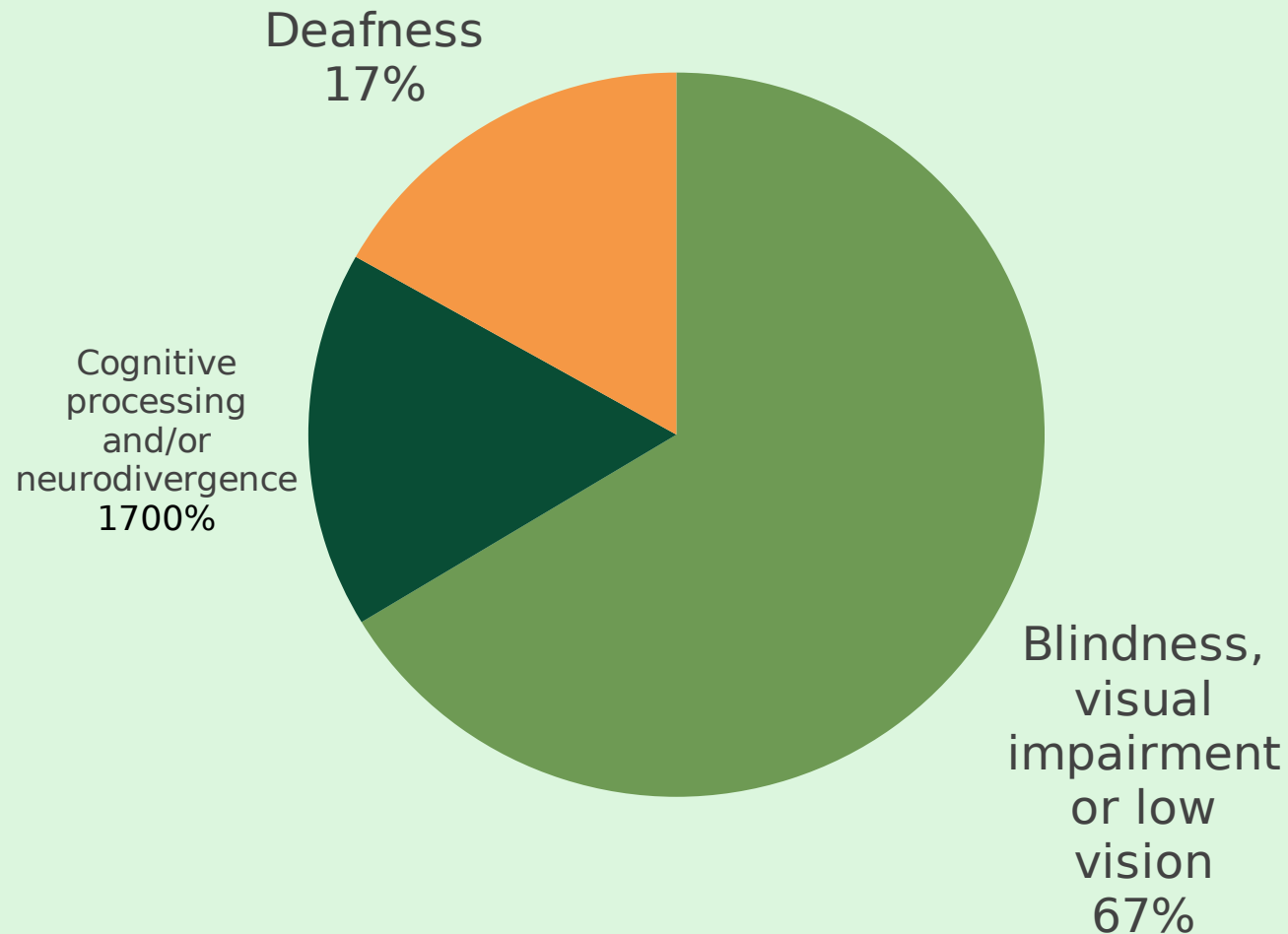
Browser(s) regularly used



100% of respondents stated that they use Mac as their Operating System (OS).

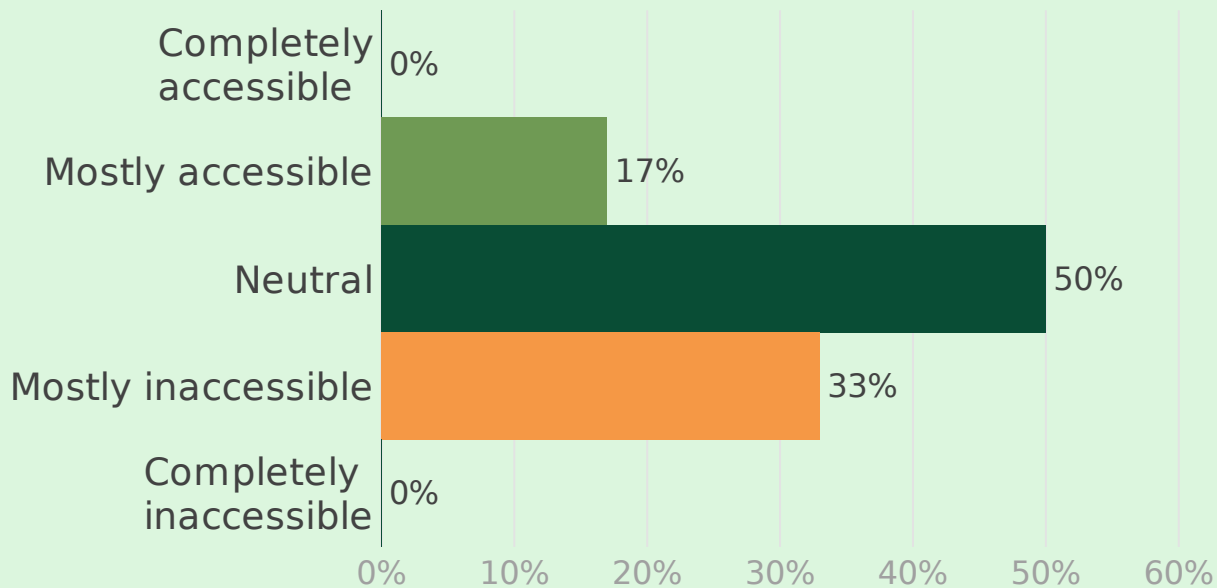
One respondent commented, *"Edge has the most natural 'voice' and in-built text-to-speech tech, compared to Chrome, Safari, Firefox or Apple's in-built voices."*

Reasons for using assistive technologies



University systems accessibility

Accessibility of the University's library systems



67% of respondents face issues or delays when using assistive technology to access library systems or resources (e.g. excessive time to locate resources).

These results demonstrate that for assistive technology users there are often issues with the university's systems and necessary resources.

Issues faced when using assistive technology for university work or research

*“Some of the materials I need for my research **are not available online or in electronic version**. There was a time a did not get the material I needed because the library did not have any readily available and accessible e-copy.”*

*“Using both magnification and screen-reader software presents **difficulties with layout**. Sometimes [it’s] better to rely on audio.”*

*“**Publishers do not have tagged pdfs** making it difficult to navigate tables or headings/subheadings in a paper. Some publishers **publish images of tables instead of actual tables**, meaning the “table” is actually an inaccessible figure”*

Issues faced when using assistive technology for university work or research continued

*"The issue is a looped one- I need assistive tech in order to "read" things, but a lot of resources provided through the **Uni's library link to platforms that aren't screen-readable** (ie. certain publishers that allow online access to resources rather than downloads block text-to-speech tech in the same way they block copy-paste). Or only make resources available in PDF format. This means that I then can't "read" things to know whether they're relevant to me or not. This then means that I need them formatted by the Disability Support Team, but I'd then be asking them to format documents without knowing if they're relevant or not, and the **team isn't resourced to format every resource available on the internet**. So I need to know what's relevant in order to have documents formatted to read, but in order to know what's relevant, I need documents formatted to read. The only way I've found to interrupt this loop is to have an Academic Support Worker assist with research, where I instruct them on my topics of interest, key words etc, they do the preliminary sourcing of Documents for me and provide abstracts, and based on those descriptions I then request those specific documents be formatted by the Disability Support team. However, because of the lack of resourcing of that team and the necessary added steps just to narrow down relevant resources, **I have needed to access extensions in order to engage in these research assessments, purely due to internal timing and efficiency constraints.**"*

Issues with publishers and platforms

Issues with having to use different interfaces instead of just one

- *“...challenge is in the variation in platform interfaces. It would be a lot easier if we will have to deal with just one interface for getting our materials from different publishers.”*
- *“It's a mixed bag”*

Incompatibility with Mac OS

- *“Some are not compatible with Safari and some will say they are only available on PC.”*

Library and journal site requiring additional logins

- *“Unimelb library and journal sites requiring additional logins”*

Inaccessibility of publisher's sites

- *“There's a particular publisher (...) which hosts resources online, rather than making them available to download. This publisher blocks the ability to use in-built Apple text-to-speech tech.”*

Positive experiences with accessibility of library systems and resources

Familiarity with a publisher or interface helps with accessibility

- *“Taylor and Francis is very familiar to me, making it easy to use. But I would prefer using only one interface for all materials I need from the library.”*

Technology is improving, but cost and customisability remain issues

- *“E-book publishers tend to offer more accessibility, but that’s at the cost of a full e-book. VitalSource has been an okay platform from experience, but still experiences glitches and isn’t fully customisable.”*

Librarians support positive graduate student experiences

- *“I find most of the services excellent and the librarians can be a font of knowledge, particularly with such things as Endnote...”*

Recommendations

For the University of Melbourne

1. Work with graduate students who use assistive technology to ensure that system and interface updates meet their needs.
2. Establish minimum standards for all University-controlled publications (including academic content, LMS content, etc.) to ensure accessibility.
3. Ensure the University's interfaces and services are accessible for people using assistive technology.
4. Ensure consistency in interfaces and as much possible ensure graduate students can access materials through one interface.
5. Ensure the University's systems and interfaces work well with Mac OS.
6. Provide training to librarians on accessibility support for graduate students.
7. Ensure all graduate students, including international students, have access to financial support to access assistive technology and associated costs (e.g. e-books).

For the University of Melbourne to advocate on

8. Advocate to publishers for their resources and websites to be accessible for people using assistive technology.
 - a) This includes ensuring complex figures, graphs, graphics and tables are entirely accessible.
 - b) Ensure pdfs are tagged and alternatives to pdfs are easily accessible.
9. Advocate to the Australian Government for a redesign of the minimum standards for online resources and e-books to ensure they are accessible for people who use assistive technology.

These recommendations are in line with the University's duties under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic), which confers the positive duty to eliminate discrimination.